

ACTIVISM AND THE ACADEMY IN THE CASE OF THE BRIXTON POUND

MYFANWY TAYLOR, MSc Urban Studies, UCL, 2009/10, myfanwy.taylor@gmail.com



Introduction

This poster summarises research submitted for the MSc in Urban Studies at UCL 2009/10.

It aims to respond to Nicholas Blomley's call for 'a critical geography animated by both anger and hope', encompassing all three aspects of what it means to be critical – fault-finding, taking risks and imagining transitions, rather than attending only to the first (2007, p.62). By combining activism with research, a path is traced through the contradictions inherent such a critical geography in the particular case of the Brixton Pound.

The Brixton Pound is a local currency established in 2009 in Brixton, South London, by Transition Town Brixton, a community-led climate change group. It is a printed local money which can be purchased with pounds sterling at a one-to-one exchange rate for use in 180 businesses in and around Brixton.

By 'sticking' to Brixton (it cannot be spent at businesses which don't accept it), the B£ is designed to support Brixton's independent businesses and encourage local trade and production.

Towards a more hopeful critical analysis

This research pursued an interdisciplinary approach, drawing together research on local currencies, utopianism and place.

The majority of local currencies have been limited in their impact and effectiveness, being constrained by the pervasiveness of mainstream economic institutions and values. This research:

Explores whether the high profile of the Brixton Pound has been matched by a greater degree of material effectiveness than other local currencies.

Local currencies have attracted academic attention in part because of their capacity to demonstrate that modern capitalism is not the only possible economic system – regardless of their material effectiveness. In pursuing this argument, however, many academic analyses neglect to consider how current marginality might be transformed into something more powerful. To fill this gap, this research:

Develops an analysis of the Brixton Pound that begins to trace trajectories between the constrained possibilities of the present and the hoped-for future alternatives to capitalism.

The research draws strongly on David Harvey's 'spatiotemporal utopianism'. Here, change is contested, constrained and achieved step-by-step, rather than through the total realisation of some vision of the future.

These ideas are linked to debates about the potential for place-based movements to achieve change. The research follows Castree and Dirlik in taking an open approach, which is alert to the 'practical politics' of the place. It:

Explores how the present possibilities and future trajectories of the Brixton Pound might relate to its grounding in place.

Methodologies for making other worlds

This theoretical framework is married with a methodology which combines activism with research. Negotiating reflexively between two roles – academic and activist – was a formative element in the task of being critical without closing down hope.

As this methodology has been pursued more in theory than in practice, this research also:

Responds to calls for greater reflection on the experience of combining activism with research to be included within research outputs.

My particular research and activist roles developed over several months in agreement with the Brixton Pound group. They included:

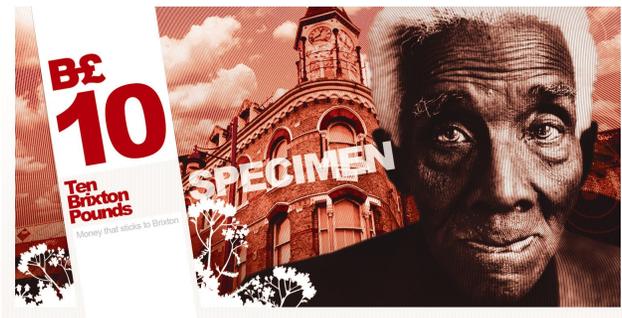
- Interviewing eight businesses, six users, and five members of the organizing group;
- Participating in 16 events and meetings; and
- Supporting businesses using the B£ and contributing to a B£ project on local supply chains.

So, is it working then?

My research found that while the Brixton Pound has achieved some notable successes – being the first alternative paper currency in an urban area in the UK, having a high profile, and being accepted by a large number of businesses, for example - use of the currency has been rather limited so far.

Reasons for this included:

- The B£ appears very inefficient compared to modern financial infrastructure.
- For many, the B£ represented an opportunity to celebrate and support Brixton, rather than a means to achieve an alternative local economy.
- Lambeth Council's involvement has thus far only extended to those actions which are consistent with - and do not challenge - its policy to raise Brixton's profile.
- The exclusivity of the B£, in terms of race and income, limits its impact and raises important questions about whose interests it is serving, and in whose name.



“ I'm afraid I haven't got the energy to go and ... get out cash, turn it into Brixton Pounds and then pay it to Mr. Webster when I go and buy a pair of shoes there. ”

(User 3, 21/06/10).

“ We support it. Try to do our bit for Brixton. ”

(Business 4, 22/06/10)

“ I might go out on a Saturday and take B£60 out, and I don't mind if B£20 ends up in my wallet ... But like if you don't have a spare twenty pounds to hold on to [then you cant do that] a lot of people in Brixton don't. ”

(User 1, 10/06/10)

“ We don't get very many B£s ... about £20 worth a week. ”

(Business 5, 20/07/10)

From present possibilities to future transformations

The theoretical approach and method of this research enabled me to identify ways in which the Brixton Pound's current limitations might be overcome and resolved. For example:

- The currency itself was not a static form, but was on its way to being something else. Possibilities were opening up around linking with a Time Bank and moving towards a digital format.
- The B£ group had built new institutions, networks and infrastructures, providing a more powerful base for future change.
- Far from being a closed and regressive project, the geography of the B£ is being practiced and imagined in creative and unexpected ways.
- Attachment and commitment to Brixton has been a powerful force behind the B£ so far, and might yet be realised in more powerful and transformative directions.

Between activism and the academy

Combining activism with research was a demanding process, which involved compromise and challenge as well as generating opportunities. For example:

- I chose to limit my research activities to those that did not cause the Brixton Pound group concern.
- When I interviewed B£ users I was able to use my knowledge to help them identify where they could buy and use B£s.

As I began to prepare to write up my research, I was forced to face the contradictions between my two roles. The real value of my methodology was the way it had enabled me to gain access to the inner workings of the Brixton Pound group, which in turn helped me to identify where its nascent possibilities might be found. It also enabled me to account for the awareness within the group of many of the same limitations and problems I was identifying.

I was able to re-work the relationship between the academy and activism, accounting for the critique that was actively practiced within the Brixton Pound, rather than 'claiming' it for the academy.

Conclusions

Taken together, this research shows that while the Brixton Pound might be presently limited and constrained, it is also rich with latent possibilities for transformation and growth. Both sides of this assessment depend crucially on one another: fault-finding alone might re-enact and re-enforce the B£'s marginality, but only imagining future evolution would be at risk of ill-informed optimism.

Combining activism with research was a formative part of this study. Giving life to two selves (activist and academic) and then bringing them back together mirrored the analytical approach of this research - to confront and negotiate geography's dilemma of how to conduct critical analysis while not closing down hope.

References and Acknowledgments

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